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## Tobacco wants more, and shouldn't get it

Just when it seems tobacco growers have demanded every billion any of them could possibly justify, they find another pot of money to claim.

Last year, Congress agreed to a tobacco buyout that will mean \$2.5 billion to Kentucky farmers and quota holders.

Then this year, the General Assembly granted them another \$114 million.

Both those times -- and plenty of others before -- there were promises of, "Just this one last time." But now the farmers want even more. Now some are demanding money from the Agriculture Development Fund, preferably in direct payments to farmers determined to forge ahead despite tobacco's diminished financial prospects, but if not that, then money to prop up the tobacco infrastructure itself.

This just shows how resistant to necessary change the tobacco culture remains. After all, the Agriculture Development Fund was specifically set up to give farmers financial help in getting out of the business before it's too late.

Public policy makers were wise enough back in 2000 to see there wasn't much future for tobacco. So they directed that half of the money that's Kentucky's share of the Master Settlement Agreement with cigarette makers be put into a fund to help tobacco farmers diversify.

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That, of course, would help the commonwealth, too, by revitalizing the rural economy.

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So it's an outrage that tobacco farmers are trying to reverse the mission of that fund -- and that some policy makers are eager to go along. State Sen. Joey Pendleton, for example, told *Courier-Journal* reporter Marcus Green, "If Toyota was leaving Kentucky, we'd do everything under the sun to keep Toyota in Kentucky. I look at the tobacco industry the same way."

Has Sen. Pendleton not noticed that the tobacco industry is mostly long gone? And that what's left, unlike the auto industry, is shrinking.

But tobacco farmers in Kentucky always believe they deserve more. "There's always equipment you can add," one recently said.

Certainly, Kentucky policy-makers can see that there's no wisdom in spending the limited public money available for agricultural investment on a crop for which the payoff is going down: Tobacco will probably bring \$1.50 a pound this year, as opposed to \$2 last year.

Meanwhile, the Burley Growers Cooperative in Lexington has about \$24 million in cash reserves, plus millions of dollars worth of tobacco stored in warehouses.

If farmers need more money, they should hit up the co-op. Taxpayers have already given them all that they should.

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